

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. April 18, 1965: John Walker, Director of the National Gallery of Art, announced today the acquisition of a rare early Northern painting, The Assumption of the Virgin, by the Flemish painter, Miguel Sithium (c. 1465/70-1525). It is one of only two religious paintings known by this master, of whose other works only a dozen or so portraits are known. One of these, A Knight of the Order of Calatrava, is in the Andrew Mellon Collection of the National Gallery. Acquired through the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, it will be on special exhibition in Gallery 40.

The painting shows the Virgin surrounded by nine angels, three of whom are holding a golden crown over her head. She stands on the crescent moon, and below her feet a highly-detailed Flemish landscape stretches into the distance.

Only 8-3/8 in. high by 6-1/2 in. wide, the painting already noted by Albrecht Dürer in the 16th-century as being of extremely high quality, was done around 1500 for Queen Isabella of Spain as one of a series of 47 panels in an "oratory" depicting scenes from the life and passion of Christ. Forty-five of the panels were painted by Juan de Flandes, a Flemish artist working at Isabella's court. The two culminating scenes, those of the Assumption of the Virgin and the Ascension of Christ, were assigned to Sithium.

Of Baltic origin but of the Flemish School by training (he was probably a student of Memling), Sithium, also known as Michel Sittow and Master Michiel, later worked at the court of Margaret of Austria, regent of the Netherlands, and at the court of Denmark.

After Isabella's death in 1505, her estate was inventoried and the panels of the "oratory" offered for sale. Don Diego de Guevara,

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treasurer to Margaret of Austria, bought 32 of the panels including the two by Sithium. Subsequently they were described in two of Margaret's inventories (1516 and 1523) as "a diptych, by the hand of Miguel, of the Assumption of Our Lord and of Our Lady, which is kept in a cypress case with two silver clasps."

In 1521 the German artist Albrecht Dürer visited Margaret and she herself showed Dürer her collection. "Among them," he wrote, "I saw about 40 little panels in oil colors, such as I have never seen for precision and excellence."

After the death of Margaret of Austria, there is no further record of the panels until 1904 when The Assumption of the Virgin appeared in an exhibition of French Primitives in Paris. In 1929, M. J. Friedländer, the art historian, identified it as the work of Sithium. The other half of the diptych, The Ascension of Christ, is in the collection of the Earl of Yarborough in England.

Mr. Walker has said, "The National Gallery is indeed fortunate to have acquired one of the rarest and most important paintings to become available in recent years. The small size of this painting only adds to its charm; the enchantment of the unfolding landscape, the delicacy and dignity of the figures, all contribute to its elegant and poetic quality."

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